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CLENG PEERSON AND NORWEGIAN IMMIGRATION

Three historical problems relating to the genesis of the Norwegian immigration to the United States in the nineteenth century have long confronted students of this subject. The first has to do with Cleng Peerson and his influence upon that great migration which in the ninety-five years since 1825 has brought more than seven hundred thousand Norwegians to this country. The second is concerned with the relative importance of religious and economic factors in bringing about the first important group emigration from Norway to America. The third problem relates to the significance of the emigration of 1825 with respect to the movement as a whole. Some writers describe Peerson as the "father of the Norwegian immigration to the United States," representing him as the "advance agent" of the immigrants of 1825, the pathfinder for Norwegian settlement in the west, and the most influential leader of the entire movement in its earlier stages.¹ Others picture Peerson as a tramp, whose

¹ Svein Nilssen, "De skandinaviske s̄etlementer i Amerika," in *Billed-magazin*, 1: 102-104; Rasmus B. Anderson, *The first chapter of Norwegian immigration (1821-1840) its causes and results. With an introduction on the services rendered by the Scandinavians to the world and to America* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1904), 54-131, 179-193; Anderson, "Kleng Peerson, the father of Norwegian immigration," in *American-Scandinavian review*, 8: 502-509; Anderson, "The first Norwegian settlements in America, within the present century," in Wisconsin historical society, *Proceedings*, 1898 (Madison, 1899), 150-167; Hjalmar R. Holand, *De norske s̄etlementers historie; en oversigt over den norske indvandring til og bebyggelse af Amerikas nordvesten fra Amerikas opdagelse til Indianerkrigen i nordvesten, med bygde-og navneregister* (Ephraim, Wisconsin, 1909), 33-46, 95-99; Nordahl Rolfsen, ed., *Norge i Amerika; livsbilleder fra nordmændenes liv og historie i de Forenede Stater* (Kristiania, 1915), 137-145; Knud Langeland, *Normændene i Amerika. Nogle optegnelser om de Norskens udvandring til Amerika* (Chicago, 1889), 10-20; E. O. Mörstad, *Elling Eielsen og den evangelisk-lutherske kirke i Amerika* (Minneapolis,

influence was insignificant, who had very little to do with the coming of the Norwegians in 1825, and whose general importance has been much exaggerated.² As to the motives of the pioneers of 1825, some writers liken the movement to the migration of the pilgrim fathers who, escaping persecution in the old world, sought religious and social freedom in the new.³ Others assert not only that the economic motive was the dominant one, but that religious persecution had virtually nothing to do with the matter.⁴ On the third question it is maintained by some that the Norwegian immigration really began in 1836, and that the movement of 1825 was practically without effect upon the immigration as a whole.⁵ Others attempt to trace, however, a direct and important connection between the earlier and the later movements.⁶ On the triple problem Dr. O. N. Nelson wrote in 1904, "The lack of documentary evidence in the case is so obvious that no writer has been able to reproduce, or even to mention, a single original document in support of his assertions or theories."⁷ Though not literally correct, this

1917), 76 ff.; Holand, "Nybygger-skisser. Den første norske emigrant i vesten," in *Symra*, 2: 93-112.

² Olof N. Nelson, "The first Norwegian immigration, or the sloop party of 1825," in *History of the Scandinavians and successful Scandinavians in the United States*, compiled and edited by Olof N. Nelson (Minneapolis, 1904), 1:125-134p; Thrond J. Bothne, "Kort udsigt over det lutherske kirkearbeide blandt Nordmændene i Amerika," in Hallvard G. Heggtveit, *Illustreret kirkehistorie . . . Gjennemseet af professor dr. theol. A. Chr. Bang. . . . Med et tillæg om norske kirkeforholde i Amerika af Th. Bothne. . . .* (Chicago, 1898), 821-829; Johannes B. Wist, *Den norske indvandring til 1850 og Skandinaverne i Amerikas politik* (n. p., [1889]), 13-17.

³ The best statement of this view is Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 54-131, 217-218.

⁴ Nelson has argued strongly for this view in his "The first Norwegian immigration, or the sloop party of 1825," in *History of the Scandinavians in the United States* (Nelson, ed.), 1:125-134p. Compare Kendrie C. Babcock, *The Scandinavian element in the United States* (University of Illinois Studies in the social sciences, volume 3, number 3 — Urbana, 1914), 22-25, 39-40.

⁵ Bothne, "Kort udsigt over det Lutherske kirkearbeide blandt Nordmændene i Amerika," in Heggtveit, *Illustreret kirkehistorie*, 821-829; Wist, *Den norske indvandring til 1850 og Skandinaverne i Amerikas politik*, 16-17; Nelson, "The first Norwegian immigration, or the sloop party of 1825," in *History of the Scandinavians in the United States* (Nelson, ed.), 1:125-134p.

⁶ Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 77-198 ff.; Holand, *De norske settlementers historie*, 33-99. Compare Babcock, *Scandinavian element in the United States*, 29 ff.; Nilssen, "De skandinaviske setlementer i Amerika," in *Billedmagazin*, 1: 18-19; Langeland, *Nordmændene i Amerika*, 16 ff.

⁷ In *History of the Scandinavians in the United States*, 1: 126.

statement indicates sufficiently the lack of contemporary sources on the subject.⁸ New evidence has recently come to light which makes possible a fresh consideration of the entire question. In the present article an attempt is made to evaluate the historical significance of Cleng Peerson; incidentally, however, it is believed that definitive evidence is produced with respect to the second and third problems.

The problem of Cleng Peerson is complicated by the fact that he had a curious and eccentric personality. "Much has been written about this pathfinder in the West," writes Professor Flom, "and romance and legend already adorn his memory."⁹ While it is probable that an investigation of archival materials in Norway will yield additional evidence and will aid in stripping away the "romance and legend," a sifting of the sources now available permits the correction of some common misconceptions. Of the early life of Cleng Peerson little is known. He was born in 1782 on a farm called "Hesthammer," in Tysvaer parish, Skjold district, Stavanger *amt*, a short distance north of the city of Stavanger, Norway.¹⁰ His name appears originally to have been Kleng Pedersen Hesthammer, but in his later years he invariably called himself Cleng Peerson.¹¹ He is rumored to have traveled considerably as a young man, particularly in England, France, and Germany.¹² Not until 1821, when Peerson was a man of thirty-nine years, did he become associated with the Norwegian immigration movement. In the

⁸ Mr. Anderson, for example, produces verbatim in his *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 69-76, a number of interesting accounts in New York newspapers and others describing contemporaneously the arrival at New York in 1825 of the sloop *Restoration*. To these might be added an interesting notice in *Niles' weekly register*, 29: 115.

⁹ George T. Flom, *A history of Norwegian immigration to the United States from the earliest beginning down to the year 1848* (Iowa City, 1909), 48.

¹⁰ See O[luf] Rygh, *Gaardnarne i Stavanger amt. Oplysninger samlede til brug ved matrikelens revision. Udgivne med tilføjede forklaringer af Magnus Olsen* (Kristiania, 1915), 91, 427, 446; Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 179.

¹¹ See, for example, *Democrat* (Racine, Wisconsin), September 7, 1850. The Norwegian spelling "Kleng" was Americanized as "Cleng." The last name appears variously as "Pedersen," "Pederson," "Peerson," "Peersen," "Persen." The use of the name of the *gaard* Hesthammer, from which Peerson came, is uncommon.

¹² Nilssen, "De skandinaviske settlementer i Amerika," in *Billed-magazin*, 1: 104; Holand, *De norske settlementers historie*, 33.

summer of that year, together with Knud Olsen Eide, from the island of Fogn, Peerson journeyed from Stavanger to New York by way of Göteborg.¹³ There has been some disagreement as to the purpose of this trip. According to one account he had married in Norway a wealthy and elderly widow with whom he became involved in such serious domestic difficulty that he practically fled, going first to Göteborg, where he heard a great deal about America, and then to New York.¹⁴ Another version of the matter is that Cleng Peerson and Knud Eide were sent to the United States as agents of a group of Quakers in Stavanger who desired to find a place of refuge where they might worship God without suffering any restrictions or persecutions at the hands of state officials.¹⁵

The leader of this society of Quakers was Lars Larson. Having been taken prisoner by the English in the Danish war of 1807, he was held in England until 1814, and remained one year thereafter in the employ of Margaret Allen, a prominent Quaker woman and the mother of William Allen, the Quaker missionary. Larson returned to Norway in 1816 as a converted Quaker, and, together with some friends, organized a society of Friends in the city of Stavanger.¹⁶ In 1818 impetus was given to the movement by the visit of Stephen Grellet and William Allen, Quaker missionaries, to Norway.¹⁷ It is of interest

¹³ Theodore C. Blegen, "Ole Rynning's true account of America," in *Minnesota history bulletin*, 2: 240; Nilssen, "De skandinaviske setlementer i Amerika," in *Billed-magazin*, 1: 104; *Nordstjernen: et national demokratisk blad* (Madison, Wisconsin), July 22, 1857. A signed statement by Cleng Peerson is here printed. See *post*, note 80.

¹⁴ Ansten Nattestad's account of Cleng Peerson, as quoted by Nilssen, "De skandinaviske setlementer i Amerika," in *Billed-magazin*, 1: 102-103. Nattestad was a well-known pioneer of 1837 who was personally acquainted with Peerson. Compare Theodore C. Blegen, "Two Norse argonauts: Ole and Ansten Nattestad," in *The north star*, 1: 420-422; 2: 18-21.

¹⁵ Nilssen, "De skandinaviske setlementer i Amerika," in *Billed-magazin*, 1: 102-104. Anderson, Holand, Flom, Mörstad, and others accept this view, while it is rejected by Nelson, Bothne, and Wist.

¹⁶ See the account in Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 46-47. The whole subject of the rise of the Quakers is dealt with in George Richardson, *Rise and progress of the Society of Friends in Norway* (London, 1849), especially chapters 1 and 2. See also *Life of William Allen with selections from his correspondence* (London, 1846), 1: 364-365.

¹⁷ Stephen Grellet, *Memoirs of the life and gospel labors of Stephen Grellet* (Philadelphia, 1862 [?]), 360-366. See *Life of William Allen with selections from his correspondence*, 1: 361-370.

to note that Grellet, a French nobleman who had taken refuge in America during the French revolution and there had been converted to Quakerism, had lived in the United States for twelve years.¹⁸ Grellet probably described to his Norwegian friends conditions in America. It is reasonable to suppose, also, that these Quakers gave some thought to the new world as an ideal land with respect to religious liberty, particularly as their faith was causing them trouble, if not persecution, in Norway.

The history of Norway is relatively free from religious persecution.¹⁹ Abundant evidence proves, however, that in the first four decades of the nineteenth century dissent and separatism were rather harshly dealt with by the government and the established church. Hans Nielsen Hauge, the leader of a laymen's movement in protest against the "rationalism and secularization then prevalent among the clergy of Norway,"²⁰ was imprisoned from 1804 to 1814.²¹ His followers, largely peasants, were not separatists, but their relations with the established Lutheran church and with the government were strained, and the death of Hauge in 1824, regarded as a result of his imprisonment, doubtless intensified this feeling of mutual distrust.²² The Quakers, to a greater extent than the Haugians, were subject to annoyance and interference by the state church and by secular officials. "Their children and those of other dissenters," writes Dr. Babcock, "must be baptized and confirmed in the

¹⁸ Grellet, *Memoirs of the life and gospel labors of Stephen Grellet*, 18 ff. In 1822 the Stavanger Quakers were visited by an English missionary, Thomas Shillitoe, who remained in the vicinity for about a month. His interpreter at the meetings which he held was "a young man from New Bedford, in North America." Shillitoe not long after his Norwegian trip went to America. That he was interested in America is clear from his attitude toward two German Quakers who were stranded in Bergen. Richardson writes, "T. Shillitoe became so deeply interested for these persons that he got forward a subscription at Bergen, to help them over to America." Richardson, *Rise and progress of the Society of Friends in Norway*, 42, 47, 50; article on Thomas Shillitoe in the *Dictionary of national biography* (New York, 1885-1903), 52: 108; Alexander Lange, *Provst Alexander Langes optegnelser om sit liv og sin samtid 1792-1863* (Christiania, 1905), 156-158.

¹⁹ Anton C. Bang, *Den norske kirkes historie* (Christiania, 1912), especially 436 ff. Hallvard G. Heggtveit, *Den norske kirke i det nittende aarhundrede* (Christiania, 1905-1911), volume 1.

²⁰ Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 48.

²¹ Anton C. Bang, *Hans Nielsen Hauge og hans samtid* (Christiania, 1874), 369; Heggtveit, *Den norske kirke i det nittende aarhundrede*, 1:313 ff.

²² Bang, *Hans Nielsen Hauge og hans samtid*, 483-488; Knut Gjerset, *History of the Norwegian people* (New York, 1915), 2: 404, 445 ff.

Lutheran church; they must themselves attend its services and pay taxes for its support, or suffer fines or other punishment for failing so to do.”²³ Added to this situation was the possible consequence of the refusal of the Quakers to do military service and to take oaths. It is certain that these conditions caused discontent and that the position of the Quaker in Norway was far from pleasant. This fact must be given consideration in studying the antecedents of the immigration of 1825. On the other hand, it may be admitted at once that the Quakers of Stavanger were humble and poor. The sect gained no headway among the well-to-do. Consequently economic advantages were of great importance to such Quakers as were contemplating emigration.

Cleng Peerson remained in America from 1821 to 1824. A newspaper article published shortly after the arrival of the immigrants of 1825 constitutes the most definite bit of information on this period. This item, presumably obtained either from Peerson himself or from some member of the immigrant party, says:

Two agents were originally sent over by the company and funds appropriated to defray the expense. These funds, we understand, were placed in the hands of a man, who was afterwards unfortunate in business. They then found themselves in a strange land, among a people of different laws, customs, and language, with all of which they were unacquainted. Determined notwithstanding to fulfill the object of their mission, they resolutely set out on their enquiries, laboring with their own hands to defray their expenses. They proceeded in this manner until one was seized with a malady which brought him to his grave. During all the time of his sickness his confederate, independent of watching by his bedside and performing those kind offices so necessary to the comfort of a dying man, procured the best medical attendance, still laboring with his own hands for his support and debarring himself of the comforts of life, to

²³ Babcock, *Scandinavian element in the United States*, 24. “In the year 1821, Elias Tasted was brought under justice process for not having buried two of his children in ground that was consecrated. For this, he was sentenced to pay five specie dollars . . . a day until he should dig his children out again, and inter them in the consecrated burial ground, and follow the outward ceremonies and customs of the state church. But when this sentence came under the review of the king, Elias Tasted was entirely acquitted.” Quoted from a letter written by a Friend in Stavanger, in Richardson, *Rise and progress of the Society of Friends in Norway*, 36-37 and note. See R. Tveteraas, *Stavanger 1814-1914* (Stavanger, 1914), 118-120, in which an interesting account is given of the rise of the Quakers in that city.

administer to the necessities of his friend. After the decease of his friend, the survivor left as he was solitary and alone, proceeded on foot to examine the country, the character of the different soils, our mode of agriculture, engaging without any hesitation at any kind of employment to meet the current expenses of the day, by which means he obtained a knowledge of our customs, laws, language and agriculture. In this manner he scoured the vast regions of the west and left a journal from day to day,²⁴ which in due time he transmitted to the company, by whom he was sent to make the examination.²⁵

As to precise details this account may be unreliable. Its nature and the circumstances of its publication leave no room for doubt that in essentials it tells the truth. From another source it is now possible to corroborate the statement that Peerson, during his first sojourn in the United States, went as far west as the western part of New York, at least.²⁶ That the trip was a preliminary investigation undertaken for the Quaker society at Stavanger does not seem to be open to question.²⁷

In 1824 Peerson returned to Norway and reported to his Stavanger friends on conditions and prospects for immigrants in the United States. In the summer of this year, if not before, a group of Norwegians in and about Stavanger definitely determined to emigrate. It is probable, however, that not a few persons outside the Quaker sect became interested in the prospect of emigration to America as a result of the return of Cleng Peerson and his stories of his experiences and observations, and that herein lies the explanation of the fact that when the emigration finally occurred in 1825, the party contained a

²⁴ This is the only reference that the writer has ever seen to such a journal.

²⁵ *New York American*, October 22, 1825, quoting from the *Baltimore American*. The extract was published in Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 73-75.

²⁶ See *post*, 310-311, and note 31.

²⁷ Elling Eielsen, the famous Norwegian pioneer preacher, who was very familiar with the situation of dissenters in Norway (being himself a zealous Haugian), told Svein Nilssen in 1869 that Peerson and Eide were Quakers, sent by the Friends of Stavanger in 1821 to investigate conditions in America. Their expenses, he declared, were paid by the Quakers of Stavanger, and possibly, in part, by English Quakers. The explanation of this mission, according to Eielsen, was to be found in the spirit of religious intolerance which prevailed at that time in Norway. This piece of evidence, confirmatory in essentials of the newspaper article quoted above, was published long before any controversy had arisen with respect to Peerson and the migration of 1825. Nilssen, "De skandinaviske settlementer i Amerika," in *Billed-magazin*, 1: 104.

considerable number of persons who were not Quakers. That the original impulse came from the Quakers remains, nevertheless true.

It has been commonly supposed that Peerson remained in Norway until 1825 and then crossed to New York by way of Göteborg. That he was not a member of the famous "sloop party" and that he met the immigrants of 1825 when they arrived at New York are two facts that have long been known. Dr. Nelson asserts that the "sloop folk" met Cleng Peerson in New York in 1825 purely by accident and that Peerson had returned to America without any knowledge whatsoever of the preparations for departure which were being made in Stavanger and its vicinity. Scouting the view that Peerson was the "advance agent" of the group, Dr. Nelson says, "If he had been the real instigator of the movement and the chief organizer of the party, it seems he would have accompanied the emigrants across the ocean."²⁸ The truth of the matter is that Peerson returned to America in 1824. That he did not accompany the emigrants was, under the circumstances, the best proof that he was their advance agent. Recently a manuscript copy of a letter written by Cleng Peerson came to light. This copy was made by Thormod Madland in Stavanger, Norway, on June 28, 1825, a few days before Madland sailed for America as a member of the sloop party.²⁹ Peerson's letter, as indicated in the copy, was dated New York state, December 20, 1824. He informed his "father, brother, sister, brother-in-law,³⁰ and friends," that after a journey of six weeks he had arrived in good health at New York where he was received very cordially by his friends. With his companion on this trip, Andrew Stangeland, he remained in New York City for five days, and then left by steamer for Albany. The two travelers then worked their way to Troy and, via the Erie canal, to "Salia Salt Works" and Farmington,

²⁸ Nelson, "The first Norwegian immigration, or the sloop party of 1825," in *History of the Scandinavians in the United States* (Nelson, ed.), 1: 134k.

²⁹ The writer a short time ago learned of the existence of this letter in the possession of Mr. Martin Mauritzon of Chicago. Through the generosity of Mr. Mauritzon and of Mr. Alfred Adsem of Minneapolis, the letter has been presented to the Minnesota historical society. *Minnesota history bulletin*, 3: 371.

³⁰ Peerson's brother-in-law was Lars Larson, the organizer and leader of the Society of Friends in Stavanger. Chapters 2 and 3 of Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, contain much interesting information about Larson.

where Peerson had friends—interesting evidence of the fact that during his first stay in America, from 1821 to 1824, he had visited western New York. Leaving his comrade, Peerson walked to Geneva, New York, to purchase land from the land commissioner at that city both for himself and for his friends in Stavanger.³¹ He wrote: “The land commissioner is very friendly, and has promised to aid us as much as he can. We arrived at an agreement in regard to six pieces of land which I have selected, and this agreement will remain effective for us until next fall.”

Peerson had a house under construction which he expected to complete by New Year’s day. This house, he said, was “on the site selected for you whose arrival I am awaiting”; but in the spring he intended to build on his own land. While in Rochester he had bought a stove and suitable accessories. He already owned, in addition to five acres of land which he intended to clear in time for the spring sowing, a cow, for which he had paid ten dollars, and some sheep. “I have informed you of the prices of all things in Knud Eie’s letter,”³² he wrote. His letter indicated great eagerness for the arrival in America of his Stavanger friends whom he planned to meet in New York. He had secured promises from “the friends in Macedon” to care for his sister and others until cabins with sufficient room to house the party should be built. He encouraged the prospective immigrants to have faith in the promises which he had made them while in Norway, and to put their trust fully in providence. “You must not allow yourselves to be frightened away by talk,” he said. “I spoke with many persons in New York in regard to selling the vessel. You will certainly be able to dispose of a

³¹ The town of Farmington was in Ontario county, New York, a short distance from Geneva. That Peerson had established connections with Quakers at this place is practically certain. Farmington was in fact a Quaker community. The whole township had been bought by a society of Quakers in 1789. C. F. Milliken, *A history of Ontario county, New York, and its people* (New York, 1911), 1: 321. “The majority of the early settlers and nearly all the pioneers of Farmington were Friends.” *History of Ontario county, New York, with illustrations and family sketches of some of the prominent men and families*, edited by George S. Conover, compiled by Lewis C. Aldrich (Syracuse, 1893), 392. Madland, in making his copy, read Farmington as “Fanington.”

³² On Knud Eide, Peerson’s companion on his first trip to the United States, see Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 60 ff.

small ship, but the law forbids the sale of a large one.³³ Therefore do whatever seems best to you. Young persons can easily cross to London and from there to New York for thirty dollars. My friends in New York have promised to do all in their power to sell the vessel as advantageously as possible. On the other hand, if you could invest your money in Swedish iron, and hire a vessel, that would accomplish the same end." He asked them to acquaint him with their plans in good time, and closed by exhorting them all to deal with each other in a spirit of brotherly love, to grasp the "need of help and salvation from the hand of the Almighty," and to heed "His call and admonitions."

This letter proves clearly that Cleng Peerson was the advance agent of the immigrants of 1825, that he was directly urging the enterprise and encouraging its backers, that he arranged in 1824 for the purchase of land for his friends, that he was attempting to arrange for the sale of their ship should they purchase one for the journey, that he had received coöperation and promises of aid from a group of friends in New York City, who are known to have been Quakers,³⁴ and from acquaintances in western New York, that he made active preparations for housing the immigrants when they came, that his comrade on this journey was Andrew Stangeland,³⁵ and that, far from being a scoffer and an atheist, he evidenced at this time a pious, religious attitude.³⁶ Thus the letter makes entirely untenable the views of Nelson and others who have maintained that Cleng

³³ This is a possible explanation of the fact that when the immigrants of 1825 arrived, they came in a very small vessel, so small indeed that it was confiscated by the authorities for violation of the federal law of 1819 limiting the number of passengers to two to each five tons of the ship. Babcock, *Scandinavian element in the United States*, 26; Blegen, "Ole Rynning's true account of America," in *Minnesota history bulletin*, 2: 241. Macedon, the village referred to by Peerson, was a short distance north of Farmington, in Wayne county.

³⁴ That Quakers in New York did lend active assistance to the sloop folk when they arrived in 1825 is well known. Rynning wrote of this aid in his book on America published in 1838. Blegen, "Ole Rynning's true account of America," in *Minnesota history bulletin*, 2:241-242.

³⁵ Stangeland was long supposed to have been one of the fifty-three passengers on the *Restoration* in 1825. Attention may be directed here, also, to certain erroneous conclusions in Flom, *History of Norwegian immigration to the United States*, 49-50.

³⁶ This conflicts with the traditional views on this particular point. See *post*, 327, and notes 96, 97, 98.

Peerson had no direct influence upon the first important Norwegian emigration to the United States in the nineteenth century. That he was indeed the trail-blazer and advance agent for the sloop folk, and that his name stands properly at the head of the list of Norwegian immigrant leaders of the last century, can no longer be disputed.

The story of the coming of the Norwegians in 1825—the beginning of the great Scandinavian exodus of the nineteenth century—has often been told.³⁷ Only a brief summary need be presented here. Fifty-two in number, the party left Stavanger in the summer of 1825. A small sloop and a cargo of iron had been purchased. On October 9, after a trip of fourteen weeks, the vessel reached New York.³⁸ The voyage had been circuitous, the vessel having touched at Madeira, and having then sailed to New York by way of the West Indies and the Gulf of Mexico.³⁹ Some of the experiences and adventures that befell the group of immigrants aboard this ship, the *Restoration*, as it was called, were long a favorite theme among the Norwegian pioneers.⁴⁰ When they finally arrived at New York they were met by Cleng Peerson. The immediate problems were to sell the ship, to proceed to the interior, and to prepare for the win-

³⁷ Blegen, "Ole Rynning's true account of America," in *Minnesota history bulletin*, 2: 240-243; Nilssen, "De skandinaviske settlementer i Amerika," in *Billedmagazin*, 1:102-104; Nelson, "The first Norwegian immigration, or the sloop party of 1825," in *History of the Scandinavians in the United States* (Nelson, ed.), 1: 125-134 p.; Langeland, *Nordmændene i Amerika*, 10-13; Flom, *History of the Norwegian immigration to the United States*, 45-54. The most detailed account is in Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 54-131. See also C. A. Tingvold, "The first Norwegian emigrants in America," in *The north*, August 10, 1892.

³⁸ *New York Commercial Advertiser*, October 10, 1825. There were fifty-three passengers when the *Restoration* arrived, one having been born on the way. *New York Daily Advertiser*, October 12, 1825. The notices in these newspapers are reproduced in Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 69-71.

³⁹ *Vestlandet* (Stavanger, Norway), October 25, 1910.

⁴⁰ Holand states that the story of these experiences was first told by Johannes W. C. Dietrichson in his *Reise blandt de norske emigranter i de forenede nordamerikanske fristater* (Stavanger, 1846). This is inaccurate. So far as is known, Ole Rynning, *Sandfaerdig beretning om Amerika til oplysning og nytte for bonde og menigmand* (Christiania, 1838), contains the first printed version of the affair. Compare Blegen, "Ole Rynning's true account of America," in *Minnesota history bulletin*, 2: 240-241. The wording of Dietrichson's account indicates that he secured all his information on this particular matter from Rynning's book, and not from immigrants, as Holand maintains. Holand, *De norske settlementers historie*, 37 and note.

ter. Peerson's connections in New York stood the party in good stead at once.⁴¹ Ole Rynning wrote a few years later:

It created universal surprise in New York that the Norwegians had ventured over the wide sea in so small a vessel, a feat hitherto unheard of.⁴² Either through ignorance or misunderstanding the ship had carried more passengers than the American laws permitted, and therefore the skipper and the ship with its cargo were seized by the authorities.⁴³ Now I can not say with certainty whether the government voluntarily dropped the matter in consideration of the ignorance and child-like conduct of our good countrymen, or whether the Quakers had already at this time interposed for them; all I am sure of is that the skipper was released, and the ship and its cargo were returned to their owners. They lost considerably by the sale of the same, however, which did not bring them more than four hundred dollars. The skipper and the mate settled in New York. Through contributions from the Quakers the others were enabled to go farther up into the country. Two Quakers in the company established themselves in Rochester. One of these, Lars Larson by name, lives there still.⁴⁴ The others bought land in Murray,⁴⁵ five miles northwest of Rochester.⁴⁶

Difficulties and hardships fell to the lot of the settlers in the next five years, but they persevered and eventually established themselves on a firm footing.⁴⁷

On the problem of the motives back of this emigration of 1825 the foregoing account throws some light. Attention is here called to an official source of information on the early emigration from Norway which adds much to our understanding of this as well as of many other phases of the whole subject.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Nilssen, "De skandinaviske settlementer i Amerika," in *Billed-magazin*, 1: 72.

⁴² Compare the interesting extracts from contemporary New York newspapers in Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 69-76.

⁴³ See Blegen, "Ole Rynning's true account of America," in *Minnesota history bulletin*, 2: 241, note 37.

⁴⁴ See *ante*, 306, and note 16. Compare Blegen, "Ole Rynning's true account of America," in *Minnesota history bulletin*, 2: 242, note 38.

⁴⁵ In Orleans county, New York.

⁴⁶ The passage quoted is from Rynning, *Sandfærdig Beretning om Amerika*, chapter 2. Blegen, "Ole Rynning's true account of America," in *Minnesota history bulletin*, 2: 241-242.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 242. Nilssen, "De skandinaviske settlementer i Amerika," in *Billed-magazin*, 1: 72.

⁴⁸ Kongeriget Norges ellevte ordentlige storthings forhandlinger i aaret 1845. Förste del, indeholdende kongelige propositioner og meddelelser litr. A og B. samt no. 1-9

On November 8, 1843, the finance department of the Norwegian government, with a view to solving some difficult problems which had arisen in connection with the increasing emigration from Norway, proposed that a commission be authorized by the king to investigate carefully the whole emigration problem and to prepare a draft of a law for government regulation of the movement. Three men were appointed members of this commission: F. C. Borchsenius, the *amtmand*, or sheriff, of Bratsberg *amt*, a region from which emigration had been particularly heavy; J. Gasmann, vice consul and broker in Porsgrund; and Dr. F. C. Faye, a distinguished physician of Skien.⁴⁹ These men were very well suited for the task of investigation for they had already, by virtue of their official positions and places of residence, been in close touch with the emigration from the southwestern districts of Norway. On December 27, 1843, the commission presented a report to the king explaining the need of legislation in order to eliminate some of the evils attendant upon the emigration, and including an elaborate draft of a law.⁵⁰ With the history of this attempt to legislate with regard to Norwegian emigration we are not here concerned.⁵¹ The interesting thing to note is that on December 15, 1844, the commission presented to the king a supplementary report in which were discussed the causes, origin, extent, and general nature of the emigration movement up to that time.⁵² This document bears the marks of careful preparation. It is based not only upon the personal observations of its authors, but also upon special reports from ministers of the Norwegian church, from bailiffs, from surveyors of the customs, and from chiefs of police.⁵³ A special (Christiania, 1846). Number 6 of the documents included in this volume is entitled: "Angaaende udvandringer til fremmede verdensdele." This document, sixty pages in length, deals exclusively with the emigration from Norway to the United States.

⁴⁹ "Angaaende udvandringer til fremmede verdensdele," in *Kongeriget Norges ellevte ordentlige storthings forhandlinger i aaret 1845*, 1: 1-5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 7-19.

⁵¹ While the *storting* in 1845 rejected the proposed law, the government turned its attention to ameliorating some of the conditions which caused discontent and emigration, and in 1845 was passed a "dissenter law" which gave freedom of worship to the Quakers.

⁵² "Angaaende udvandringer til fremmede verdensdele," in *Kongeriget Norges ellevte ordentlige storthings forhandlinger i aaret 1845*, 1: 23-42.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

report on emigration prepared by officials in Stavanger *amt* on April 20, 1837, for the finance department, was also used by the commissioners.⁵⁴ Furthermore, they collected a large number of letters and diaries of immigrants in America who had sent them to their friends and relatives in Norway. This report of 1844 was made public and is preserved in the official publications of the Norwegian *storting*. Unfortunately, the letters and journals of immigrants, making at least fifty appendixes to the report, were not printed.⁵⁵

Along with many important contributions to our knowledge of the early Norwegian emigration movement,⁵⁶ this official report, used in conjunction with other sources now available, offers what will probably be accepted as a definitive explanation of the relative weight of religious and economic factors in the first important Norwegian migration, and of the significance of this migration of 1825 in connection with the later movement.⁵⁷

The conclusions of the royal commissioners may be summarized as follows:

1. The migration of the sloop folk from Stavanger in 1825 led directly to the emigration in 1836 and 1837 and consequently to the whole movement as it broadened in scope after 1836. The connection is found in the gradual dissemination in Norway of information concerning the enterprise initiated in 1825, in the special influence of immigrants upon their relatives who remained in Norway waiting for news, in the effect of

⁵⁴ The Stavanger report of 1837 was probably based in part upon an investigation by the Reverend Nils Herzberg, who at the request of the *amtmand* of the district made an inquiry into the causes and extent of the emigration. Herzberg's report, dated July 6, 1837, consisted chiefly of a number of typical "America letters," including one written by Gjert G. Hovland. A transcription of this report, made from the original in the local archives at Ullensvang, Norway, was recently acquired by the Minnesota historical society. See Theodore C. Blegen, "The America letters," in *The north star*, 2: 44, and note. O. Olafson, "To Amerikabreve fra 1835," in *Nordmads-forbundet*, 4: 265-271.

⁵⁵ These appendixes are presumably preserved in manuscript in the government archives at Christiania, Norway.

⁵⁶ The statistics as to numbers of emigrants, districts from which they came, and the discussion of causes, will make necessary a considerable revision of the conclusions of American investigators of the Norwegian immigration movement.

⁵⁷ The portion of the document dealing with this subject is based primarily upon the special report from Stavanger *amt*, referred to above, the very place from which the sloop folk came. "Angaaende udvandringer til fremmede verdensdele," in *Kongeriget Norges elleve ordentlige storthings forhandlinger i aaret 1845*, 1:24-25.

encouraging and informative letters from friends in the Norwegian settlement in the United States—letters that were read, copied and recopied, and circulated widely among the discontented classes of Norway, and that were popularly known as “American letters”—and finally in the widespread influence of returned immigrants, or “America travelers.”⁵⁸

2. The men and women who left Norway for America in 1825 were, in part at least, Quakers. As such they were discontented—and had good cause to be discontented—with their treatment by officials of state and church under Norwegian laws. Their faith was at least a contributory (*medvirkende*) motive in leading them to emigrate to a country “where complete religious liberty prevails.”⁵⁹

3. “On the contrary it is not to be assumed that political or social conditions have had any direct influence upon the decisions of later emigrants who left Stavanger Amt in 1836 and 1837. The latter were motivated by the favorable reports which have been received from the first emigrants as to the economic advantages offered by a country where ‘they believed they could easily establish themselves upon land which they expected to obtain at little or no cost, and where, as farmers, they might attain happier circumstances in the future.’ And those who

⁵⁸ “Angaaende udvandringer til fremmede verdensdele,” in *Kongeriget Norges ellevte ordentlige storthings forhandlinger i aaret, 1845*, 1: 24. In connection with these points the following studies by the present writer may be referred to: “Ole Rynning’s true account of America,” in *Minnesota history bulletin*, 2: 222, 242, 243; “Two Norse argonauts: Ole and Ansten Nattestad,” in *The north star*, 1:420; “The America letters,” *ibid.*, 2:43-45, 75-77. Of an “America traveler” of 1835, Babcock writes, “From near and from far, from Stavanger, from Bergen and vicinity, and from the region about Christiansand, people came during the long northern winter, to talk with this experienced and wordly-wise man about life in New York or in Illinois—or, in their own phrase, ‘i Amerika.’ There before them at last, was a man who had twice braved all the terrors of thousands of miles of sea and hundreds of miles of far distant land, who had come straight and safe from that fabulous vast country, with its great broad valleys and prairies, with its strange white men, and stranger red men. The ‘America fever’ contracted in conferences with Slogvig and men of his kind, was hard to shake off.” *Scandinavian element in the United States*, 31-32.

⁵⁹ “Angaaende udvandringer til fremmede verdensdele,” in *Kongeriget Norges ellevte ordentlige storthings forhandlinger i aaret 1845*, 1: 24-25. Richardson, in his work on the Norwegian Quakers, written in 1849, points out that several of the “little company” of Stavanger Quakers went to America in order “to avoid afflictions in bearing the cross.” Richardson, *Rise and progress of the Society of Friends in Norway*, 52. Of the eight individuals who made up the first Stavanger Quaker “meeting of discipline,” four afterwards emigrated to America, according to Richardson. *Ibid.*, 27 and note. See also a statement on page 124.

were skilled in a trade were confident that they could earn their livelihood by means of their previous training.”⁶⁰ It is admitted in the report, however, that possibly, even in 1836 and 1837, a few individuals may have been motivated by dissatisfaction with the treatment of dissenters, especially Quakers, in Norway.⁶¹

The commissioners stressed the importance of the fact that the first emigration was occasioned by intolerance in the treatment accorded the Quakers, and discussed carefully the question of the Norwegian constitution and laws in respect to religious worship, reaching the conclusion that these laws needed revision, especially because of their effect upon the status of Quakers.⁶²

In considering the general causes underlying the later movement, the commissioners doubtless presented the truth in a nutshell when they said: “It must, however, be admitted without question, that even though the first sprouts of the migrations must be sought to a certain extent in imperfections in the law, which have produced dissatisfaction among certain individuals, their growth in recent times is the result of other causes, especially of the common need, affecting the great majority of the emigrants, of seeking a less difficult existence in a new country.”⁶³

There is no record of travels by Peerson in the period from 1825 to 1833. He seems to have remained during these years in the Norwegian settlement in New York. The experiences of the settlers convinced him that the west offered better possibilities than the east for Norwegian immigrants. In 1833, therefore, he started from Kendall, New York, on a pedestrian journey to the west in search of suitable lands for settlement by the Norwegians. His travels took him into Ohio, across Michigan,

⁶⁰ “Angaaende udvandringer til fremmede verdensdele,” in *Kongeriget Norges ellevte ordentlige storthings forhandlinger i aaret 1845*, 1: 25.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.* See *ante*, note 51.

⁶³ *Ibid.* In general the migration of the Quakers and their associates in 1825 acquires added importance as the background, motives, and influence of that movement become clearer. The historical importance of the pathfinder of that migration, Cleng Peerson, is likewise increased in proportion to the significance of the movement as a part of the general emigration from Norway.

and through northern Indiana to Illinois. It has been asserted that he walked as far north, along the shore of Lake Michigan, as Milwaukee, where he met the founder of that city, the famous fur-trader, Solomon Juneau, who in response to his inquiry informed him that Wisconsin land was heavily forested and entirely unsuitable for settlement.⁶⁴ If Peerson did visit the trading post of Milwaukee, he made his way back to Chicago without delay. In Illinois he selected a site which determined the location of the first Norwegian settlement in the west, and which gave great impetus to the westward migration of the Norwegians. This was the Fox river region, in the town of Mission near Ottawa, in La Salle county, Illinois. Peerson, some years later, in describing the manner of his choice said that while on a walking trip from Chicago he came to a hill overlooking the Fox river valley. Almost exhausted from hunger and fatigue, he threw himself on the grass and thanked God for directing his steps to such an attractive land. In his enthusiasm he forgot temporarily his hunger and weariness, while his thoughts turned to Moses and the promised land.⁶⁵

Peerson trudged back to the Norwegian settlement in New York; he had walked, as it appears, considerably more than two thousand miles since he started on his pilgrimage to the west. That he doubtless did describe the west to his compatriots as a sort of promised land is evidenced by the fact that in 1834, under his leadership, an advance guard of several persons from the New York settlement went out to Illinois and settled in the Fox river valley in La Salle county.⁶⁶ Larger numbers came

⁶⁴ Holand, *De norske settelmenters historie*, 43-44. Mr. Holand gives no reference to his authority. On Peerson's trip, see Flom, *History of Norwegian immigration to the United States*, 52-53; Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 171 ff; Langeland, *Nordmændene i Amerika*, 18 ff. When he left New York, Peerson had two companions, one of whom, Ingebrigkt Larson Narvig, went no farther than Monroe county, Michigan. What became of the other is not known. Narvig was a staunch Quaker and in many respects a remarkable pioneer figure. Compare Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 141 ff.

⁶⁵ Langeland, *Nordmændene i Amerika*, 18-19. The story was told to Langeland by Peerson in Norway in 1843. Langeland was a prospective emigrant, and Peerson, in trying to picture America as favorably as possible, may have invented the tale. Langeland's simple statement of the affair seems to have given rise to numerous elaborate accounts of what is termed "Cleng Peerson's dream," some of them very artistically embroidered with imaginative details.

⁶⁶ Gjert G. Hovland, in a letter written on April 22, 1835, states that six families

from the east in 1835, and in 1836 and 1837 the colony in Illinois was augmented by large groups of immigrants who came directly from Norway.⁶⁷ Peerson is usually credited with having met and guided the immigrants of 1836 to the west. With respect especially to Illinois and the west, Mr. Anderson does not overstate the case when he thus writes of Cleng Peerson: "He led the way in the settlement of the Norwegians on American soil, and thousands of natives of Norway and their descendants now occupying happy and luxurious homes in the Fox river valley owe their prosperity and happiness in part at least to the leadership and efforts of that remarkable man."⁶⁸ The Fox river settlement, moreover, became a center from which radiated many of the later settlements of the Norwegians in the middle western states.

Land records show that Cleng Peerson bought at least two hundred and forty acres of land in the settlement in June, 1835. At least eighty, and perhaps one hundred and sixty, acres were purchased by him for others, his relatives.⁶⁹ Though he usually bought land in the settlements which he founded, he was not in fact a real farmer. The necessary patience and industry to remain in one place and achieve success Cleng Peerson lacked utterly. He usually waited until a start had been made and the settlement was well under way toward civilization and progress, and then he left in search of new locations, new frontiers, perhaps new adventures. He was in truth, as has been said, a "Viking who was born a few centuries after the Viking period."⁷⁰ There was about him something of that "scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas, and in-
of the Norwegians who had settled in New York sold their land and moved to Illinois in the summer of 1834. He adds that the eight families remaining in the New York settlement desired to sell their land and go west as soon as possible. A transcript of this letter is in the manuscript collections of the Minnesota historical society. Many details relating to the establishment of the La Salle settlement may be found in Flom, *History of Norwegian immigration to the United States*, 55-63, 89-96.

⁶⁷ Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 170 ff. Blegen, "Ole Rynning's true account of America," in *Minnesota history bulletin*, 2:222 and notes.

⁶⁸ *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 176.

⁶⁹ Original land records at Ottawa, Illinois, were examined by Mr. Anderson, and are printed in his *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 175-176.

⁷⁰ O. N. Nelson, "Bemerkning til Prof. Andersons indledning," in *Amerika*, May 2, 1894.

difference to its lessons," which Professor Turner says have accompanied the American frontier.⁷¹

Two years after his purchase of land in Illinois, Cleng Peerson led a party of settlers from Illinois to Shelby county, Missouri.⁷² That this migration, in the spring of 1837, was preceded by a trip by Peerson alone seems very probable. The colony established at this place seems not to have thrived. "It was too far removed from other settlers, too far from a market; the settlers suffered want and became discouraged."⁷³ Most of the settlers moved about the year 1840 to a new location, the so-called Sugar creek settlement in Iowa. Peerson purchased eighty acres of land in Shelby county, but probably made no serious attempt to cultivate it.⁷⁴ One year later he returned, for the second time, to Norway, with the purpose of bringing out settlers for his Missouri venture. He reached Norway in 1838 and spent the winter of 1838-1839 in the southwestern part of that country. In 1839 he returned again to the United States as the leader of a party of immigrants, most of whom came from the region of Stavanger. This group Peerson conducted to Missouri by way of Cleveland and the Ohio river, a journey that was attended, in this case, by many difficulties and inconveniences.⁷⁵ Shortly after Peerson's return the majority of the settlers in Shelby county moved to the Sugar creek settlement in Iowa.

The evidence as to Cleng Peerson's connection with the first Norwegian settlement in Iowa is conflicting. Dr. Flom states that Peerson was probably the first Norwegian to enter Iowa, since he had passed through the southeastern corner of that state on his way to Missouri; but he does not credit Peerson with any important relation to the Iowa settlement on the ground that he did not actually settle in Iowa.⁷⁶ Mr. Anderson

⁷¹ Frederick J. Turner, "The significance of the frontier in American history," in Wisconsin historical society, *Proceedings*, 1893, p. 112.

⁷² Flom, *History of Norwegian immigration to the United States*, 125 ff. Blegen, "Ole Rynning's true account of America," in *Minnesota history bulletin*, 2: 247, note 48.

⁷³ Flom, *History of Norwegian immigration to the United States*, 125.

⁷⁴ Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 187.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *History of Norwegian immigration to the United States*, 190-192.

says that Peerson was sent by the other settlers in Missouri to inspect the land in Iowa and that the result of this investigation was the founding of the new settlement in 1840.⁷⁷ Reiersen, in his *Veiviser*, published in 1844, writes that Hans Barlien and a man named Tesmann were "presumably" the founders.⁷⁸ It is probable, however, that Barlien was influenced by Peerson. Mr. B. L. Wick presents the name of Peerson as one of the most important names in connection with the Iowa settlement, but does not explain his assertion.⁷⁹ Cleng Peerson himself, about 1851, in a letter published in a Norwegian newspaper, stated that he had lived in the states of New York, Illinois, Missouri, and *Iowa*.⁸⁰ It is safe to conclude that he had an active connection with the Iowa settlement.

In 1842 Peerson made a third visit to Norway and spent the winter of 1842-1843 in that country. Most of the time was passed in the vicinity of Stavanger, where he disseminated information about America, told of his travels, described conditions in the Norwegian settlements in the United States, and distributed letters which he had brought with him from immigrants in America to their friends and relatives. In May, 1843, he sailed from Bergen for New York on the vessel *Juno*, which carried a party of eighty emigrants. They took the usual route to Illino-

⁷⁷ First chapter of Norwegian immigration, 186-187. Anderson bases his statement on a published account by one of the original settlers, but does not give a reference to the source.

⁷⁸ J. R. Reiersen, *Veiviser for norske emigranter til de forenede nordamerikanske stater og Texas* (Christiania, 1844), 157. Tesmann was one of the immigrants who came from Norway with Peerson in 1839. A little book of twenty-seven pages was published in Stavanger in 1839, under the title: *Kort beskrivelse over de viktigste erfaringer under et ophold i Nord-America og paa flere dermed forbundne reiser*. The author was Peter Tesmann, one of Peerson's comrades. It is probable that this was the man to whom Reiersen referred. So far as the writer knows no copy of this book is to be found in America. He is at present pushing an inquiry for it in Norway.

⁷⁹ B. L. Wick, "The earliest Scandinavian settlement in Iowa," in *Iowa historical record*, 16: 21-29.

⁸⁰ *Nordstjernen*, July 22, 1857, from *Hamars budstikke* (Norway), 1850-1851. This newspaper contains a signed statement by Cleng Peerson in which he advocates Texas as a place for settlement. Introductory to this is the sentence: "The undersigned came to the United States in August, 1821, and has resided in the states of New York, Illinois, Missouri, and Iowa, and now lives in Texas where I arrived a little more than two years ago. I have, moreover, traveled a great deal in the United States so that I know right well the conditions in this country."

nois, and Peerson served as the guide of at least a portion of them on the way to the west.⁸¹

In 1847, Cleng Peerson, now a man of sixty-five years, having sold his land in Missouri, joined the famous communistic settlement in Henry county, Illinois—the Swedish Bishop Hill colony.⁸² He is reported to have contributed to this society the money which he had received from the sale of his farm lands. He now evidenced a purpose to settle permanently and to renounce his nomadic habits. His wife in Norway, from whom he had been separated since 1821, had died some years before Peerson arrived at the Bishop Hill colony. He now married a young Swedish woman, a member of the communist settlement. His second marital venture seems to have been a short and bitter experience, for shortly after his marriage he departed from both the colony and his Swedish wife, and returned to the Fox river settlement. He is reported to have said that he left the Bishop Hill colony “robbed of all he possessed, and sick in body and mind.”⁸³ The Fox river colony, which he had founded in the thirties, had become a large and prosperous settlement. Reiersen noted that in 1844 it had about six hundred inhabitants, most of whom had already passed the initial pioneer stage, lived comfortably in good houses, and were in an independent position.⁸⁴ One might reasonably suppose that Cleng Peerson, now past sixty-five years of age, would have settled permanently and have passed the remaining years of his life in this flourishing settlement of his own choice. But he was still a restless seeker for new fields.

He had long been interested in Texas as a possible site for a Norwegian settlement. When Reiersen came to America in

⁸¹ Langeland, *Nordmændene i Amerika*, 52, 59. Letter from O. Canuteson to R. B. Anderson, December 16, 1894, quoted in Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 188-189.

⁸² An entertaining account of his connection with the Bishop Hill colony is in Holand, *De norske settelmenters historie*, 96 ff. There are no references to sources, however, and the reliability of the description seems to be open to question. Compare Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 189.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 189. In a letter to Mr. Anderson written by a niece of Cleng Peerson, it is implied that Peerson during his several visits to Norway tried to induce his wife to come to America with him but that she declined. *Ibid.*, 183.

⁸⁴ Reiersen, *Weiviser for norske emigranter til de forenede nordamerikanske stater og Texas*, 152.

1842, Peerson advised him to make a colonization effort, and spoke very favorably of Texas in this connection.⁸⁵ In 1849, apparently recovered from the ill effects to body and mind of his brief experience with communism, Peerson set off for Texas. During his investigations in that state he visited John Nordboe, a Norwegian settler with whom he had previously become acquainted, and who lived a short distance south of Dallas. When he returned to La Salle county in 1850 he was "full of Texas fever."⁸⁶ In a letter written on August 20, 1850,⁸⁷ Peerson says that he recently returned from Texas where he had spent the preceding winter and spring. He had traveled considerably in the vicinity of the Eros and Brazos for a distance of about one hundred and sixty miles, and on both sides of the Trinity, particularly on the west side for a couple of hundred miles north and south. He describes the land, the quality of the soil, the climate, the crops, and the prospects for cattle and sheep raising. He had visited the Norwegian settlement in eastern Texas but did not approve of the choice of land, though he concedes that they raised fairly good crops. The following sentence is characteristic: "But I can not approve of the method of settlement practised by the Norwegians in establishing themselves so closely together instead of spreading out more so as to have greater freedom in their sphere of action." He regrets to hear that thousands of Norwegian immigrants were settling in northern Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa, while, only a thousand miles to the south, better land and a more favorable climate gave distinct advantages to Texas over these northern regions. He writes in this letter that he intends to return to Texas in the following September.⁸⁸

With some countrymen Peerson left Fox river in the fall of

⁸⁵ Martin Ulvestad, *Normændene i Amerika, deres historie og rekord. Bidrag til og bindeled mellum Norges historie og nord-amerikas — de Forenede Staters i särdeleshed* (Minneapolis, 1907-1913), 1: 197-198.

⁸⁶ Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 189-190.

⁸⁷ The letter was written at Norway, La Salle county, Illinois, to Knud Langeland, and was printed in full in the latter's newspaper, *Democrat*, September 7, 1850. A file of this rare newspaper is in the library of the Luther theological seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.

⁸⁸ Peerson, curiously enough, made no reference to slavery in discussing the case for Texas. One of the most potent reasons why the Norwegian settlements in the southwest never gained any considerable headway was the deep-rooted hostility of the Norwegians toward slavery. See Blegen, "Ole Rynning's true account of America,"

1850. The party went south to New Orleans by way of the Mississippi river, then west on the Red river to Shreveport, and from there, with oxen, to Dallas county, Texas.⁸⁹ Mr. O. Canuteson, in a letter dated December 16, 1894, thus describes this Texas venture: "In 1850, my father, with his family, came to my uncle, Halvor Knudson, in Illinois. My mother had died from cholera between Chicago and Ottawa. In Ottawa, we found Kleng Peerson, just back from Texas, and on his advice, and on his promise to be our guide, we concluded to go to Texas. He stayed with us the three years we lived in Dallas county, and when we moved to Bosque county in 1854, he came with us, not as the leader then, but as a follower, being too old to undertake leadership any more. The last years of his life he had his home with O. Colwick, but would of course, go around among his neighbors, where he was always welcome and felt at home."⁹⁰ A son of Mr. Colwick has described Cleng Peerson's life in these last years. Peerson's power as a story-teller, his vision of the future, and his peculiar *penchant* for preceding the advance of civilization into new regions on the frontier particularly impressed this young listener. That the man was eccentric was easily forgiven, for he was at the same time very kindly and accustomed to serving others unselfishly without thought of compensation. According to T. T. Colwick, the Texas state legislature presented Peerson with a gift of three hundred acres of land in Neils, Bosque county, in appreciation of his services as a pioneer leader.⁹¹

in *Minnesota history bulletin*, 3:257, and note; Babcock, *Scandinavian element in the United States*, 157-160.

⁸⁹ The account of T. T. Colwick in Ulvestad, *Nordmændene i Amerika, deres historie og rekord*, 1: 200.

⁹⁰ Letter quoted in Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 190.

⁹¹ Ulvestad, *Nordmændene i Amerika, deres historie og rekord*, 1: 201. The actual amount of land given Peerson was three hundred and twenty acres. An act passed on August 13, 1856, required the commissioner of the general land office to issue a patent to "Cling Pearson" for this amount. *Special laws of the sixth legislature of the state of Texas* (Austin, 1856), chapter 121, p. 53. On the Norwegian settlement in Bosque county, Texas, in this period, see C. W., "Beretning om de norske settelmenter i Texas," in *Billed-magazin*, 2: 75. On the settlement in general, see "Det norske settlement i Meridian, Bosque county, Texas," in *Emigranten*, September 5, 1859. Compare *Nordstjernen*, July 22, 1857. A recent description is Axel Arneson, "Bemerkninger om norsk indvandring til Texas og om Bosque settlementet isaerdeleshed," in *Nordmands-forbundet*, 5: 94-105.

On December 16, 1865, Cleng Peerson, then almost eighty-four years of age, died. A monument on his grave, placed there in 1876 by his countrymen in Texas, has engraved upon it the following words: "Cleng Peerson, the first Norwegian immigrant to America. Came to America in 1821. Born in Norway, Europe, May 17, 1782. Died in Texas, December 16, 1865. Grateful countrymen in Texas erected this monument to his memory."⁹² His Texan countrymen did not, of course, know that many Norwegians had come to America long before Cleng Peerson was born.⁹³

The activity of Peerson, with its geographical and time range, may be indicated in the following summary:

Born in Norway	1782
To America	1821
In New York state as agent of Norwegian Quakers	1821-1824
To Norway (Stavanger and southwestern parts)	1824
To America, and from New York City to western New York, to prepare for the arrival of the immigrants of 1825	1824
To New York City to meet the sloop folk and conduct them to western New York	1825
Walking trip to the west: New York, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, possibly Wisconsin, and back to New York. Object: to find a site for a Norwegian settlement in the west	1833
From New York to Illinois; the founding of the Fox river settlement	1834
To New York City and return. Object: to guide the immigrants of 1836 to the west. (Not fully verified)	1836
To Missouri. The founding of the Shelby county settlement	1837
To Norway	1838

⁹² The funds were raised by public subscription. Anderson, *The first chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 191.

⁹³ J. O. Evjen attempts to prove that no fewer than one hundred and eighty-eight Scandinavians settled in New York before 1700, fifty-seven of whom were Norwegians. *Scandinavian immigrants in New York, 1630-1674; with appendices on Scandinavians in Mexico and South America, 1532-1640, Scandinavians in Canada, 1619-1620, Scandinavians in New York in the eighteenth century, German immigrants in New York, 1630-1674* (Minneapolis, 1916).

To America and the west: Cleveland, the Ohio river, and the Missouri river	1839
To Iowa	about 1840
To Norway	1842
To America and the west	1843
Missouri and Iowa	1843-1847
Bishop Hill colony, Illinois	1847
Fox river settlement, Illinois	about 1849
To Texas. Object: investigation with a view to a site for a Norwegian settlement	1849
To La Salle county, Illinois	1850
To Dallas county, Texas, via New Orleans and Shreve- port, with a company of emigrants	1850
Near Dallas, Texas	1850-1854
Bosque county, Texas	1854-1865
Died in Texas	1865 ⁹⁴

Ansten Nattestad, who knew Cleng Peerson personally, describes him as a marvelous story-teller. The hospitality of the pioneer homes was always gladly extended to Peerson, for a visit by him always meant interesting tales of travel and of strange places, of visits home to Norway; in short, his coming meant entertainment and instruction. Tradition represents him as a kindly and generous man, ever ready to be of assistance where help was needed, whose aid was appreciated the more because of his tales of travel, his droll stories, and his queer personality.⁹⁵ It has been asserted that he "lacked the religious temperament," although he was strongly attracted by the tenets of Quakerism.⁹⁶ The assertion is hardly supported by the evidence in Peerson's letter of 1824, but in his later years he appears to have become a pronounced "freethinker," with little or no respect for the clergy and the church.⁹⁷ In earlier years he

⁹⁴ The summary given above is concerned only with journeys in some way related to the Norwegian immigration to America. A tradition among the pioneers who knew Cleng Peerson credits him with journeys to England, France, and Germany in his youth. See *ante*, 305, and note 13. That he made many other journeys in America, not here recorded, is possible, and indeed probable.

⁹⁵ Nilssen, "De skandinaviske settlementer i Amerika," in *Billed-magazin*, 1:102-103.

⁹⁶ Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 55.

⁹⁷ O. Canuteson, who was an intimate friend of Peerson from 1850 to 1865, wrote,

associated with Quakers, but his own relationship to Quakerism is uncertain.⁹⁸ In the forties he was attracted for a time by communistic ideas, particularly as practiced in the Bishop Hill colony, but he was quickly disillusioned by his experience in that settlement.

There can be no doubt that Cleng Peerson was generally impecunious. The pioneer tradition represented him as always having in his pockets at least two shillings, so that he might never be called penniless. He was an itinerant, something of a nomad; he possessed some of the characteristics of a vagabond.⁹⁹ But it must not be forgotten that he was not aimless. In truth, he appears to have been actuated constantly by the high aim of searching out favorable places for settlement by Norwegian immigrants, and he served again and again as a leader, a guide, and an instigator of movements of immigration to America and to the settlements in the west in the future of which he had faith. He usually owned land, even though he did not actually cultivate it. However impecunious he may have been, it is unlikely that he ever openly begged.¹⁰⁰ The probable truth of the matter is that he profited, to an unusual degree, by that bountiful hospitality so natural to frontier settlements and so particularly generous to a man of Cleng Peerson's broad experience and eccentric personality.

Peerson was restless, unstable, a lover of adventure, perhaps a victim of *wanderlust*. "He was something of a Peer Gynt," writes Dr. Flom, "but without Peer Gynt's selfishness or his eye for the main chance; the roving spirit dominated Peerson wholly; not until old age had laid its hand on him did he yield

"He was the most pronounced freethinker I have ever known. . . . He believed little or nothing of the Bible, especially of the supernatural part thereof. Whether he at any time had belonged to the Quakers, I can not say positively, but time and again I heard him talk about them as models in religious and temporal matters, and I heard him talk about getting . . . aid and comfort from Elias Tastad of Stavanger, Norway, he being their leader in that city." Quoted in Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 192.

⁹⁸ Elling Eielsen does state definitely that Peerson was a Quaker at the time he was sent to America in 1821. Nilssen, "De skandinaviske settlementer i Amerika," in *Billed-magazin*, 1: 104.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 103. Thrond Bothne curtly disposes of Peerson as a tramp, but he fails so completely to recognize the real significance of Peerson's career that this characterization is of little value. "Kort udsigt over det lutherske kirkearbeide blandt nordmændene i Amerika," in Heggtevit, *Illustreret kirkehistorie*, 822.

¹⁰⁰ Nilssen, "De skandinaviske settlementer i Amerika," in *Billed-magazin*, 1:103.

to the monotony of a settled life; but even then in the wilderness of Texas in the fifties.”¹⁰¹ The same writer states that he “took no part in the upbuilding” of this Texas community, that he took “no active interest in its progress,” and that “in a settled community he alone was unsettled; he was never able to gather himself together into concentrated action and prolonged effort in a definite cause or undertaking. A vagabond citizen, he died in poverty.”¹⁰² Dr. Flom overlooks the interesting fact, however, that this poverty was of Peerson’s own choosing, due to his advanced age; for in Texas he owned half a section of good land and some other property, but he gave all this to Mr. Colwick on the condition that the latter should care for him until his death.¹⁰³ Cleng Peerson was interested in a “definite cause,” and to its advancement he devoted “prolonged effort.” While his career doubtless did not exemplify “concentrated action,” it was nevertheless sufficiently consistent to possess a considerable degree of unity, especially from 1821 to 1850.¹⁰⁴ In the fashioning of that career, restlessness, lack of stability, and love of change and of adventure no doubt played their part. Perhaps, indeed, if these be human weaknesses, Peerson may be said to have won through his frailties the significant position which he occupies in the history of Norwegian immigration to America, for these qualities seem to have made of him the pathfinder that he was. They were united, however, with a definite and philanthropic purpose:¹⁰⁵ the desire to aid his countrymen, burdened

¹⁰¹ Flom, *History of Norwegian immigration to the United States*, 125-126.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Ulvestad, *Nordmændene i Amerika, deres historie og rekord*, 1: 201.

¹⁰⁴ To attempt to apply the standards of a successful farmer to a man who was only incidentally a farmer is obviously a mistake.

¹⁰⁵ To the unselfishness of Peerson’s services many testimonials have been given. Only one unfavorable contemporary criticism of Peerson has been found. A letter from H. Gasman, of Pine Lake, to Reiersen, January 12, 1844, mentions Cleng Peerson as a type of man to be avoided, if possible, by immigrants. It says that Peerson, while pretending to assist the emigrants who accompanied him from Norway in 1843, actually defrauded them, and was rewarded by getting a sound whipping at the hands of the indignant emigrants. Reiersen, *Veiviser for norske emigranter til de forenede nordamerikanske stater og Texas*, xxvi. This charge is made much of in Nelson, *History of the Scandinavians in the United States*, 126-134k. It is carefully omitted in Holand’s eulogy of Peerson in *Symra*, 2: 93-112. It conflicts with the invariable testimonies to Peerson’s honesty and philanthropic purposes which Nilssen gathered when he visited old pioneers on a quest for historical materials in 1868. Nilssen, “De skandinaviske settlementer i Amerika,” in *Billed-magazin*, volumes 1 and 2. The ex-

by an old-country economic status which limited their opportunities and circumscribed their lives, to find a sphere of labor in the United States in which they might achieve happiness and prosperity. Never content to remain in one place and win the ordinary rewards of patient work, Cleng Peerson traveled back and forth across the Atlantic, and trudged from frontier to frontier, always searching for desirable lands, and leading to these lands groups of settlers who possessed the qualities which he lacked, who founded settlements, who built homes, and conquering the wilderness to which they came, achieved that prosperity which was the lodestar that had drawn them to the west. Professor Svein Nilssen, who published in 1869 and 1870 the results of numerous interviews and extensive researches in the old settlements, declares without qualification that Cleng Peerson exercised a greater influence upon the early Norwegian immigration and settlement than any other man.¹⁰⁶ He asks what would have been the course of events had there been no Cleng Peerson. Certainly the Norwegians would have come to the United States and to the west had there been no Cleng Peerson to lead the way. Such a hypothesis, however, can not diminish the historical importance of the actual leader.

Cleng Peerson was the pathfinder for the first group emigration from Norway to the United States. He was the leader of the vanguard of the great Norwegian migration to the American west. His incessant travels, his reports of conditions, and his personal influence affected the course and gave impetus to the progress of the whole movement in the first twenty-five years of its history. He may with truth be called the trail-blazer of plantation of the charge is simple. Himself an immigrant of 1843, Langeland, not aware of any charge made against Peerson in this connection, states that the party fell into the clutches of a forwarding company in New York. He specifically states that *Peerson was the only one of the group* who warned the emigrants that they should have nothing to do with this company, and that if they did they would be cheated. Langeland, *Nordmændene i Amerika*, 59.

¹⁰⁶ "Despite his faults and shortcomings, Cleng Peerson was certainly the right man to head the movement. Unsteady though he was, none could deny him honor and uprightness. He was good hearted and always prepared to help others. . . . Thotgh he was extremely poor personally, yet none succeeded better than he in alleviating the needs of others, doing this by securing the intercession of others. He was always a faithful friend of the needy and suffering." His goal was "to work with all his power for the temporal happiness of his fellow-beings." Nilssen, "De skandinaviske settlementer i Amerika," in *Billed-magazin*, 1: 103-104.

the earlier Norwegian immigration. To unravel the meshes of legend entwined about his curious personality is difficult. This fact must not, however, be allowed to obscure the historic value of his work with respect to the establishment of the Norwegian element upon American soil.

THEODORE C. BLEGEN

HAMLINE UNIVERSITY
ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA